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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 GEORGETOWN 001350

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/27/2015

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SUBJECT: GUYANA ELECTION PREVIEW #2: CALL FOR LONG-TERM OBSERVERS, DIFFICULTIES WITH REGISTRATION AND BIOMETRICS

REF: GEORGETOWN 1271

Classified By: Political Officer Benjamin Canavan
For reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (U) SUMMARY. While progress continues on some fronts, three major problems loom with preparations for the 2006 elections: a) the urgent need to secure long-term observers to monitor the registration process that began in October; b) hiccups in the plan to scan and cross-match all registered voters' fingerprints; c) some citizens' inability to obtain birth certificates needed to register. The next donor meeting will take place on January 5. END SUMMARY.

Donor Consensus that Long-Term Observers are Critical

2. (C) The Commonwealth, European Union, and CARICOM all have preliminary plan to send short-term observers to monitor the July/August polling-day mechanics. However, the process of casting and counting votes is not/not the chief concern for the upcoming elections and the blessing of short-term poll-watchers who were not in Guyana for the registration process will not convince disgruntled losing parties that the election was free and fair. The ABCEU donor group members (America, Britain, Canada, European Union, United Nations) all agree that a long-term Election Observation Mission (EOM) should monitor the voter registration process that began in October and the creation of the 2006 voter list. These are the two most contentious issues for the Guyanese electorate.

3. (C) The focus of post-election violence in the last three elections has been the PNC's loss in polls declared free and fair by all observers. With reason or not, the PNC has blamed its losses on failures in the registration process and compilation of the voters list. In the run-up to the 2006 election, PNC leaders are making very clear in private conversations that they dispute the legitimacy of the registration process and that the elections should be postponed two years so they can be held "properly". In the meantime, they propose an interim power-sharing government for two years. (Note: The PNC concerns are interesting given that all GECOM decisions regarding the 2006 elections so far have been made by unanimous votes, including the PNC-nominated commissioners.)

4. (C) The worrisome difference for the 2006 election is that this time some PNC leaders are suggesting that "certain elements", who are always "unnamed" and "uncontrollable", will use pre-election violence to prevent/postpone the elections while the international community forces President Jagdeo to let the PNC into an interim power-sharing government. Ambassador, EmbOffs, and other donor missions reiterate the unacceptability and folly of this strategy at every official and private opportunity. An independent, credible, expert evaluation of the registration process by a long-term EOM could significantly affect Guyanese perceptions of the registration process and could reduce the potential for pre-election violence. The opportunity to do this will be gone by the time short-term election observers arrive.

Fishing for Long-term Observers:
5 Lines in Water, No Catches Yet

5. (SBU) Guyana's 2006 general elections began with the opening of continuous registration in October 2005. Speaking with international donors in June 2005, President Jagdeo made clear that he wanted as many observers as possible for as long as possible. Unfortunately, his office did not send the invitation letters to potential observer organizations until September 2005, only a month before the registration process began. The Commonwealth, EU and Carter Center have already begun discussions with the GoG regarding plans for observer missions.

6. (C) The Commonwealth sent an Observer Assessment Mission in early December. The Commonwealth's Special Advisor for the Caribbean shares donors' view that long-term observers are critical, but says it is unlikely the Commonwealth can invest the resources necessary for long-term observers. As an alternative she will make frequent short trips to Guyana to observe the registration process and prepare for the two

Commonwealth observer teams that will arrive one month and one week prior to elections.

17. (C) The EU is due to send an election observer assessment mission in January. The EC delegate and UK High Commissioner are both pressing the EU to include long-term observers in their plans, but even if the EU acts rapidly after its assessment mission, it would be difficult to get an EU team in place before the continuous registration exercise concludes in mid-March.

18. (C) Minister of Public Service Jennifer Westford told Charge on December 21 that she had just returned from discussions with Jason Calder and President Carter in Atlanta regarding the Carter Center sending observers. She said the Carter Center "will send a team in two or three weeks to look around". Post's USAID mission has also encouraged the Carter Center to send long-term observers and has offered funding, but has not yet received any feedback.

9 (C) The Canadian High Commissioner appears to have given up on getting an OAS long-term observer in place. He reported that Canada is now seeking to fund a long-term observer via the UN. Canada hopes that the UN might be able to react quickly enough to get an observer on the ground soon enough to be here during the critical registration period.

10. (C) OAS A/SYG Ramdin separately told Ambassador and other donor chiefs that he seeks to invigorate long-term involvement of OAS in strengthening democracy and governance in Guyana. The OAS mission in Guyana is moribund at best and apparently unaware (and seemingly uninterested in) OAS plans for involvement in the upcoming election.

Problems with Voter Registration

11. (C) The donor community remains concerned that the requirement--new for the 2006 election--that new registrants show a birth certificate or passport as proof of age/citizenship may disenfranchise many potential voters. More importantly, even if the absolute numbers affected are relatively small, this problem is tailor-made for forces that seek to disparage the electoral process. Canadian High Commissioner Picard met with Minister of Home Affairs Gail Teixeira on December 9 to discuss the issue and briefed the donor community the next day. According to Picard, Teixeira acknowledges the urgent need to implement measures to correct this problem. However, Teixeira warned that other senior government officials may not share this sense of urgency and are reluctant to take the necessary steps to address the problem. The donors agreed to press the birth certificate issue further. To that end, Picard sent a letter to Teixeira on December 16 with copies to Head of the Presidential Secretariat Roger Luncheon a

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nd the Chairman of GECOM Steve Surujbally. The letter states: "Given the importance to ensure that all citizens who are entitled to vote can exercise that right, the Donor community would like to know what measures the Government of Guyana plans to take in order to ensure that information about late birth registration is widely available and that applications are processed in an efficient and timely manner so as to enable voters to register with GECOM as soon as possible." The letter also requests a briefing by the responsible GoG officials. The donors hope that the letter will put the issue on the cabinet's agenda for action.

12. (C) On December 23, Teixeira informed Charge that she had met with GECOM, the General Register Office (GRO), the Ministry of Local Government, and the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs (MAA) to address the registration issue. She said that in 2004 the GoG had undertaken a birth registration drive in the interior with MAA Community Development Officers (CDOs) and GRO personnel collaborating to late register 4,000 people. The GoG plans to leverage this experience by sending the CDOs out to find others who still need to register, help them prepare their affidavits and documents, and then present them to GRO.

13. (C) Although Teixeira felt that the bulk of unregistered births are in the interior, she said the elderly who do not have birth certificates face problems, too. They may have voted in the past when registration rules were enforced less strictly. However, if they have since moved or lost their ID card, they will not be able to re-register. Teixeira complained that people are confused over the voter registration process and that she does not understand why GECOM will not accept baptismal certificates as adequate proof of citizenship, even joking that these are probably more reliable than GRO-issued birth certificates. Teixeira encouraged Charge to bring future concerns with voter registration to her attention, as the GoG does not want to disenfranchise anyone.

Despite Fingerprint Analysis, Voter List to be Contentious

14. (C) GECOM is moving ahead with a plan to scan and cross-match fingerprints to eliminate any multiple voter registrations. A team from the Electoral Office of Jamaica (EOJ) is scheduled to arrive in January to scan approximately 450,000 sets of fingerprints from the 2001 final voters list (2001 OLE) and an anticipated 60,000 from newly registered voters. EOJ will then cross-match all the prints to look for duplicate registrations. The project is scheduled to take three months. Donors are skeptical about the EOJ project for several reasons, primarily GECOM's inability to provide the results of 500 sample fingerprint scans EOJ took during an exploratory visit in November; also GECOM's doubtful ability to negotiate a sound contract with EOJ; and GECOM's expatriate IT manager's reservations about the project.

15. (SBU) The PNC continues to insist on house-to-house verification to delete from the voters list any persons who have died or migrated. This is already a source of serious dispute between the PNC and GECOM and could trigger future conflict. Regardless of whether their complaints are valid, opposition members are exasperated and angry that GECOM, in almost five years, has taken no action to rid the 2001 OLE of persons not qualified to vote. The detailed timeline for GECOM's election preparations lists house-to-house verification of the 2001 OLE as an activity yet to be completed (verification of newly registered voters is ongoing). However, the GECOM Chairman told donors he has no intention to do this verification.

Broken Server

16. (C) GECOM has tried and failed to switch on the long-dormant server that contains the official 2001 OLE. The Joint International Technical Assessor (JITA) said that GECOM is waiting for parts to repair the server. News of this technical difficulty surfaced three weeks ago. Opposition members have latched onto it as an example of GECOM's ineptitude and as further justification for their condemnation of GECOM's Chairman.

ID Cards behind Schedule

17. (U) Production of ID cards is two months behind schedule as GECOM is waiting for necessary equipment to arrive. The JITA told the donor community that the earliest ID card production will begin is late February or March. This would still leave three to four months to print and distribute the cards and is not cause for concern at this time.
THOMAS